

Christina Crossingham was a member of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign's winter work brigade from 13 December 2008 to 3 January 2009. The following is a report of her experiences.

British Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC) organises groups of people, known as brigades, to visit Cuba in winter and summer. The British brigade joins with those from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and others to form the Nordic Brigade. The group members are called brigadistas. Of the twenty-nine British 14 were women and 13 men with all age groups between 18 and 67 and a very wide range of interests and backgrounds represented. Our host organisation in Cuba was an NGO called Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (ICAP) or Institute of Friendship between People.

Joining a work brigade is a practical way of showing solidarity with the Cuban people. It provides an opportunity to learn about the Cuban Revolution and the consequences of the US trade blockade and to meet Cuban people. The brigade has three elements, practical work in agriculture or construction, cultural exchange and learning and donation of material aid from your home country.

The Brigade lasted for three weeks and was based at the Campamento Internacional Julio Antonio Mella (CIJAM) near Caimito less than an hour south west of Havana. While this account mentions most of the events in the programme it is not chronological.

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After an excruciating delay at Gatwick, lengthy luggage reclaim and money changing in Havana we arrived very late at night. We shambled into the bunk rooms, a dazed bunch of strangers, claimed a bunk each and slept deeply. Each room houses 8. You have a bunk with pillow, sheet and blanket. It can be chilly at night and I was glad I brought an extra rug from home. Breakfast was a filled bread roll, milk or yoghurt, orange juice and coffee.

We had arrived a day before the programme was due to begin so, next day, itching to explore, some of us got a mini bus taxi into Havana. We were driven through an area of grand and beautifully maintained colonial houses used as embassies and diplomatic missions. Further on we passed smaller but equally beautiful houses. Our driver said, "This is where the wealthy used to live. Now? It is still where the wealthy live." His English was fluent. He had been a chemical engineer but can earn more by taxi driving three or four days a week. The taxi was a very smart modern vehicle. He was clearly proud of his country, pointing things out and telling us about this and that but there were questions he deftly avoided. We ambled around la Habana vieja stopping here and there, taking it all in. Our driver picked us up for the ride back to the camp deep in the countryside near Camito

I was interested in some experimental traffic lights we drove through. Instead of red/amber/green, there is a red light and then a counter flicking through the 40 seconds till the green go light appears. This seems to be designed to eliminate the frustration of waiting for the lights to change. It was Sunday and the roads almost empty but they would be very busy during the week according to the taxi driver.

A cock crow over the public address system woke us any time between 6 am and 9 depending on the days activities. Music, increasing in volume, made it almost impossible to remain in bed. The first item in the ICAP programme was an official welcome and laying of a wreath at the Julio Antonio Mella memorial just inside the camp gate. We all

wore our special T shirts which distinguished us from the crowd of Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, Danish, two Swiss and one Belgian brigadistas. Then lunch, the queue for which became a daily opportunity to meet and chat with people. The food was similar each day; rice, green lentils, meat or fish and salad with orange juice. Very healthy.

We traveled everywhere in old blue buses which rattle and squeak but never failed us. Mercifully they had no air-con, just good old fashioned opening windows for ventilation. We went into Havana for an afternoon wandering around. The art Deco facade of the old Bacardi building drew us in. A floor of pink marble, glittering Deco chandeliers and a large plastic christmas tree with lights contrasting massively with the street scene. Up on the first floor there was a bar with walls paneled in wood and polished tables. We ordered coffee and visited the lovely fragrant loo, being still in the process of adjusting to the camps rather basic version. The waiter, a middle aged man, very proper in a white shirt, black trousers and waistcoat said he'd been a teacher. Now he was an enthusiastic barman happy to tell us the history of this fine building which is currently used as offices. His enthusiasm was obviously enhanced by close contact with tourists and their convertible Pessos.

We found a small craft market slotted into a gap between two houses. A makeshift roof of tarps was slung between the joists of the missing building to keep the sun off. The stall holders were selling items in carved wood, brightly painted toys in *papier mashe*, toy vehicles made of drinks cans and enameled copper jewelry. All products using cheap or recycled materials and ingenuity. There were also a series of coffee mugs printed with the work of contemporary Cuban artists.

The following three mornings we were woken early and assembled, ready for work, to be divided into groups. Tasks included harvesting dry beans, orange grove maintenance, clearing a school garden and work on the vegetable and ornamental gardens at the camp. The work felt more of a token than a serious contribution but it gave us a close look at the agriculture, the countryside and the deep red earth. Beside one bean field was a cemetery behind whitewashed block walls and black scrolled wrought iron gates. The graves were ornate and carefully tended. The scene was reminiscent of rural Spain. Nearby stood an ancient tractor newly renovated with gloss paint and mudguards which were an angular replication of the originals. Although undoubtedly functional, the tractor was a showpiece. It's owner sat there taking in the sight of a hoard of visitors awkwardly bent double at the unaccustomed task of harvesting beans.

Some of us walked back to the camp after work, others returned in the bus. Ambling through the village we passed old men sitting on concrete benches outside the church, the babble of children's voices from the school playground, the kiosk shop, the houses all similar but loved and individualised. The men shook our hands and showered us with smiles, the shop offered precious little and we bought biscuits. At the edge of the village there were chickens under orange trees and tethered goats on the verge, a shiny but slightly dented Chevy with three men peering under its bonnet.

On the afternoons of those three days we had lectures in the meeting room. An historian who had lived through it all, spoke of '50 years of the Cuban Revolution', members of the Young Communist League came to debate the role of youth in the revolution and we heard about the Cuban economy and the development of ALBA. A Bolivian initiative, ALBA is the Latin American and Caribbean anti imperialist economic project which addresses the struggle against poverty and social exclusion. All the speakers spoke in

Spanish so the Spanish speakers among us had the advantage although there was a simultaneous translation.

One evening we all sat under the stars with our drinks to watch 'El proceso' (The Process), a film about the unjust imprisonment of the Cuban Five by the USA. The next morning the wife of one of the imprisoned men came to talk to us. It was such a moving experience that later on, some of the brigadistas feeling a strong wish to make a supportive contribution, discretely 'passed a hat around' and collected a substantial sum for the fighting fund which was handed to Gladys to be passed on.

That afternoon we made the first of our various visits. We had to make the difficult choice between going to the School of Social Workers, the University of Informatics Sciences or the Latin American School of Medicine.

I went to the Medical School on a huge ex-naval academy campus overlooking the sea to the west of Havana. ELAM specialises in educating students from third world countries. They get their training and subsistence free so that they can go back to their home communities as medical professionals when they graduate. Initially only students from Latin America were invited but more recently they also come from Africa and Pakistan. We had a talk and discussion in the huge lecture theatre (with arctic air conditioning) and were introduced to a group of young students who talked enthusiastically with us. Back in the welcome warmth of the sun we were offered refreshing drinks and invited to take a look around the campus. Before leaving a few of us went down to the sea for a quick paddle.

So far our evenings had been spent socialising at the camp in the open air around the tables between the bar and stage. We were entertained by films, music and a singing and dancing performance by children. One evening we obediently got dressed up and were bussed to Friendship House in Havana. Accustomed by now to the simple buildings of our camp, the beauty of this symmetrical Spanish Baroque villa was magnified by the contrast. We passed the stone perimeter wall infilled with ornate iron railings and climbed the elegantly shallow steps to the front door. The square interior hall had a gently curving stone staircase rising from the marble floor. We were ushered through to the garden where a sea of small round tables were laid for dinner. There we were served a chicken dinner with free flowing rum, had a band to entertain us and much dancing and hilarity.

It became apparent to me that this trip had two distinct elements; primarily our meeting with Cuba, the Cubans and the complex issues of politics, economics and the ideologies of the Revolution and secondly the routine of life in the camp with all the joys of new friends, communal living, unfamiliar food and cold showers. It was both intellectually and emotionally demanding, enjoyable, memorable and exceeded all my expectations.

Three days before christmas we embarked for Sancti Spiritus province in smart modern busses with ferocious air-con. We drove down the autopista for several hours along an uneventful flat plane then up into the wooded Alturas del Nordeste where subsistence upland agriculture and peasant life were evident in the small villages we passed through. This seemed a remote and untamed place. The villages were of older wooden houses. I saw buffaloes pulling a cart and 'cowboys' on horseback using lassoes to catch stray steers.

Arriving at the hotel San Jose del Lago in Municipio de Yaguajay made, for me, a shocking contrast. It stood in a manicured mature garden of specimen trees and shrubs arranged around an artificial lake and swimming pool. Attendants stood at the gates. Later when I walked in the nearby streets the contrast of the juxtaposition was even more uncomfortable. In the camp our accommodation had been closer to that of the rural Cubans and it felt appropriate.

From here we visited the Camilo Cienfuegos monument and small museum. He was one of the revolutionary guerrillas who fought with Che Guevara, his courage was legendary. Opposite the monument was a hospital housed in the former military head quarters of the Batista regime. We were invited into the hospital which was being renovated. So many of us crowded in that it felt like an invasion that I wished I was not part of. However it was interesting to see how sophisticated treatment could be given in a simple building. It felt significant that in the children's ward each bed had a rocking chair beside it.

There were two more visits to memorials. When we arrived at La Comandancia de Camilo in Jobo Rosado municipality the busses looked huge parked by the tiny museum in a traditional wooden house. A group of children stood with their teacher on the veranda and spoke a long poem, one verse each. Their performance was at once confident, dignified and engaged and their teachers guidance sensitive. This spellbinding moment held the audience motionless. We were treated to many performances of singing, acting, dance and gymnastics by children and they were very various in style but unfailingly the performers were full of confidence and enjoyment.

The museum stood on the edge of woodlands and behind it were sacks of charcoal and a pile of new hand made terracotta water pipes. Accompanied by a horse and cart and a couple of men on horseback we walked down a lane through fields and woods to the deep hiding place of the revolutionaries. There in a glade was a dramatic monument. We listened to a talk and met and spoke with people who had been in this revolutionary hideout in 1958. I would have been thirteen then.

The third monument was that of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara at Santa Clara. Its dominating architectural style is matched by the statistics. The bronze of Che weighs 60 tons and the Plaza de la Revolution that spreads at his feet holds 100 thousand people. Beneath the monument is a cave like Mausoleum where Che's remains rest along with those of some of his comrades in the presence of an eternal flame. Next door is an intimate museum of his life story with many of his possessions including his beret. Being there is a powerful experience that owes little to the effect of the stage management and everything to the memory of this extraordinary man.

Many of our visits brought the opportunity to meet with rural Cubans but this next event stood out as very special. All Cubans belong to their local CDR or *Comité de Defensa de la Revolución* which is responsible for administering voluntary community projects, arranging festivals, and other local matters. In small groups we were invited by several local CDR's to spend the evening with them. In preparation we went into central Yaguajay for some food and drink gifts to take with us. We expected to have a discussion about the function of the CDR but when we got there music was already playing and a party had been prepared in the street. Some girls gave us a very agile display of dancing and then it was everyone join in. Delicious cakes swathed in frosting had been made for us and the welcome was overwhelming. By the end of the evening addresses were being exchanged and genuine warmth had grown between us all.

On another occasion we visited a primary school. The teachers among us were presented with special postcards to celebrate Teachers Day. This annual event demonstrates the high regard Cuba has for teachers. Together with lots of parents and children from the school community, we listened to a talk and children spoke their poems. A talented young gymnast performed for us and we were shown over the school and talked to the teachers. We saw displays of work and teaching aids and my impression was of a happy and purposeful school embedded in its community.

On Christmas eve the hotel made us a delicious turkey dinner and decorated the dining room with a Christmas tree. Later there was a band and dancing in the poolside bar. The next morning in bright sunshine, we went to Trinidad. After a formal civic welcome we ambled around the cobbled streets, visited museums, watched cigars being made, bought postcards and chose souvenirs in small shops and a bustling craft market. Trinidad is a UNESCO World Heritage Site of small pastel painted buildings, larger colonial houses with balconies, museums, churches and squares. I'd happily have spent several days there. Lunch was a buffet in an elegant restaurant on Plaza Mayor, the main square. Later we drove down to Playa Ancon for an afternoon on the beach.

Christmas over we left the hotel for the journey back to CIJAM. From Jaguajay near the north coast we drove to Santa Clara for the visit to the Che Memorial which I mentioned earlier and had lunch at the ICAP branch in the town. These long road journeys were a chance to take in the varying landscape, small towns and villages or just the flat expanse of Llanura de Zapata as we went through Matanzas province. Arriving back at the camp felt like coming home. That evening there was a trip to Lenin Park outside Havana for 'The Bonfire of Friendship' event. On another evening we were treated to a flamenco ballet '*Garcia Lorca*' at the *Gran Teatro de la Habana*. The theatre is a fabulously grand opera house on the same scale as the Liceu in Barcelona.

A few serious brigade traditions had to be observed. A football match between the brigadistas and the local team from Caimito was a predictable victory for them. Then on a hot morning a road run called the 'Friendship Race' was completed by local people and brigadistas. They ran from the camp to the village where there was a prize giving. Later there was the Nordic Cultural and Cuisine evening. Each national group was to present a short entertainment. Much discussion and rehearsal throughout the camp built up the anticipation. The performances, supported by a few seriously good musicians and translators, could be described in many ways, let's just settle for hilarious. On the same evening each national group prepared samples of typical home cooking which was offered to the camp staff.

One afternoon the director of the Confederation of Cuban Women (FMC/ *la Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas*) and a representative of the Cuban Trade Union (CTC) came to meet us at the camp. Unfortunately the meetings coincided so we had to make a near impossible choice. I went to the FMC talk and discussion. The FMC is an NGO feminist organisation established on the initiative of Fidel Castro in 1960. Its purpose was and is to advance women's equality, health and education. It campaigned for equal property and social rights for women in the home which was achieved through the Family Code legislation in 1975. We had a frank discussion of issues like prostitution, discrimination and women's struggle with the traditional Cuban machismo.

New Year's Eve was celebrated at the camp with speeches a special dinner, lots of

visitors and a band. This was a very lively evening to mark the beginning of the 50th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. A celebration which will last all year and for the British have a high point in June with the CUBA50 festival at the Barbican, London. On new years day the brigadistas went to Havana for the traditional evening celebration, a low key event this year because of the vast cost of the recent hurricane damage. I remained at the camp and watched Raoul Castros speech on television. I couldn't understand what he said but the quiet power of his character was evident in his voice. Before the speech there had been a wonderfully sophisticated contemporary ballet performed under the stars with a live orchestra.

On two occasions we visited the atlantic beach to the east of Havana. The sun shone, the sand glistened and the water beckoned. I beach-combed and found some pieces of coral but also saw a tide mark of stranded blue jelly fish. We came across a small fish restaurant and ate the freshest fish lunch while listening to the music of a wandering band in the shade of a thatched hut. Ah....

I have tried to convey the breadth of the programme ICAP arranged for us and the depth of experience it offered. I certainly came home a better informed ambassador for the Cuban Revolution and glowing from the warmth of the reception we received everywhere we went.